

NPR's Free Ride

Imagine a 10-lane highway. Most vehicles travel in nine lanes, where they have to stop and pay tolls every few miles. But the tenth lane has no speed limits and no toll booths, and the drivers in the other nine lanes have to pay for the gas and tolls of the privileged drivers in that tenth lane. Outrageous? Of course it is. But that is what is going on in the world of public broadcasting, where National Public Radio (NPR) vehicles get to use that tenth lane, unencumbered by the rules and costs that apply to everyone else.

With the firing of NPR's Juan Williams for daring to suggest that boarding an airplane along with four or five intensely-staring, robe-clad, bearded guys who are all named Mohammed might make a passenger nervous, a fair amount of fuss has been made about the cash that is doled out to NPR every year via the taxpayer-subsidized Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). The CPB received about \$420 million from the taxpayers in fiscal year 2010, and Obama wants to increase that to \$460 million. Senator James DeMint (R-SC) has announced that he will introduce legislation stripping NPR of federal funding. (He should not limit the legislation to NPR; he should try to end all funding for the CPB as well.)

DeMint's move is no doubt welcomed by many Americans who don't like the idea of their tax dollars going to an army of leftists spreading an agenda with which they do not agree over the airwaves, but it is those airwaves themselves that are where NPR receives its most valuable subsidy. Thanks to the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, NPR and other public stations are allowed a fixed portion of the radio broadcast spectrum. The frequencies between 88.1 megahertz and 91.9 megahertz are limited to commercial-free broadcasts by public radio stations across the United States. Those frequencies are worth a fortune, and public radio broadcasters have been allowed to use them free of charge for decades.

If the government were to sell those frequencies to the highest bidder NPR could not afford to stay in the broadcast game. The frequencies would be bought by entrepreneurs who would broadcast the music or talk programming that would attract listeners and advertisers—putting NPR off the air. NPR simply does not have enough listeners to entice advertisers to pay for their programs. Without taxpayer funds and the free use of radio frequencies, NPR would have vanished long ago.

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guarantees everyone the right to free speech, but it certainly does not require that conservative citizens pay taxes to subsidize the radio programming of liberals. If conservative broadcasters must pay license fees and look for advertisers to fund their programming, so should liberal broadcasters. With radio, the Internet, and now satellite radio there are more than enough places for Americans to find whatever music, news, and programming they could ever find the time to listen to. Not only is it appropriate to eliminate the taxpayer funding of the CPB and NPR, their broadcast frequencies should be sold. If NPR can't make it on its own it should go the way of the dinosaurs. The same applies to public television. If Big Bird can't attract enough advertisers to fund PBS, sell his drumsticks and wings to KFC. Open

up that express lane to all drivers and make the NPR (and PBS) vehicles pay for their own tolls and gasoline.

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Note: Eliminating funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and National Public Radio will be an indicator of how seriously the expected Republican majority in the House of Representatives takes the budget deficit. If Republican legislators do not eliminate the CPB's \$420 million subsidy from the next federal budget, it will be an indication that they lack the courage to do anything else of substance.